Berlin, the Blockade, and the Cold War

Robert Spencer

1968

I

As any visitor to West Berlin knows, just outside the entrance to Tempelhof airport—unique among the world's great airports by reason of its location practically at the heart of the city— rises the Luftbrückendenkmal, a memorial whose three concrete ribs inclined towards the west symbolize the air corridors through which the city was kept alive for the eleven months from June 1948 to May 1949, when land and water routes to the west were barred by Soviet forces. The political consequences of the blockade have been even more striking than the monument erected to its memory. The earliest, most dramatic, and possibly the most dangerous postwar confrontation of the erstwhile allies, it divided the city and so drew the truce lines which, despite two decades of crises, have survived to this day as the framework for the East-West confrontation in Europe. For the West, Berlin has been "a bastion of freedom" or "a democratic island in a Communist sea"; for the East, a bone which stuck in Khrushchev's throat or "an extremely dangerous hotbed of war." After 1945 Berlin became the principal centre of tension in the Cold War. Now, twenty years after the blockade, the Berlin problem has already become an historical problem.[1] Here it is not intended to add to the considerable literature on the history of the Berlin problem, but rather to examine some aspects of the part Berlin has played in the Cold War.

Like the Federal Republic itself, the isolated enclave of West Berlin is a product of the postwar partition of Europe. The critical features of this de facto division of the continent were: first, that Berlin, in whose occupation the three Western powers participated along with the Soviet Union, lay to the east of the line along which the Soviet Union and the Western powers confronted one another; and secondly, that the frontier between the Western and Soviet worlds actually cut (and still cuts) through the heart of the city. [2] As the temporary lines of military occupation hardened into political frontiers, Berlin stood obstinately in the way of Soviet efforts to consolidate its western marches, either as a step towards a communized Germany or as a freezing of the status quo east of the Elbe. This fact alone is sufficient to explain what, in retrospect, appears as a single-minded Russian preoccupation with the problem of Berlin, whether under Stalin in 1948-49 or under Khrushchev in 1958-62. Although Roosevelt had emphasized early in wartime discussions of the occupation of Germany that "the United States

should have Berlin," and Churchill had appreciated the political significance of the Reich's capital, Western postwar attitudes to Berlin appear more as an aroused response to unforeseen Soviet pressures, rather than as the result of a prior assessment of the city's political importance. Once established in the exposed and isolated outpost of Berlin as a result of wartime agreements which assumed four-power co-operation, the Western allies chose not to withdraw from this unpromising geopolitical situation when confronted by Soviet pressure to do so. Indeed, in view of their growing alliance with the population of West Berlin and of Western Germany against Communist pressure, they increasingly found themselves in a position where they felt that they dared not retreat lest they endanger both their efforts to reconstruct a democratic Germany and their position in Western Europe. For both East and West, Berlin thus became both the symbol and the instrument of their policies. [3]

The confrontation which ensued assumed classic proportions, as East and West staked power and prestige on the outcome. The unusual geographical situation lent the confrontation a peculiar character. Soviet pressure could be applied at Berlin with only slight risk; if the risk proved too great, withdrawal was possible at any time without prejudice to its subsequent renewal. Moreover, any Western military response provoked by Russian pressure would make it appear that it was the Western powers, not the Russians, who were upsetting the status quo. And as Berlin lay behind the truce line, deep in territory which the Western powers came to acknowledge was within the Soviet sphere, Soviet pressure evoked and was aided by a powerful "Why die for Berlin?" sentiment in the West.

The emergence of Berlin as the focus of the Cold War in Europe had a history tending in quite the opposite direction. In 1945 Berlin was the scene and symbol of the unpromising experiment in governing Germany in co-operation with the Soviet Union. The wartime arrangements for the postwar occupation of Germany and of Berlin represented from the Western point of view a form of insurance, guaranteeing that Western forces should have a right to share in the occupation of the German capital, regardless of who conquered it [4] — and in 1944 with the Western allies still far from the Rhine it would have taken a rash prophet to predict that the issue "Could Eisenhower have taken Berlin?" would ever arise. In July 1945 the wartime agreements were implemented precisely as agreed a year earlier: with allied agreement, the limits of Soviet power were actually extended westward from the Elbe, beyond the line of Soviet conquest; in return, with Soviet agreement, the Western Powers secured their foothold in Berlin, inside Soviet-held (and Soviet-conquered) territory. The Western failure to secure, or even to press for, binding commitments on the security of their access routes provides further evidence of the disposition to rely on adherence to the spirit of

wartime agreements. [5] There had already been, of course, East-West differences over Poland and elsewhere, which had provoked Churchill's "Iron Curtain" telegram of May 12, 1945, and the early months of the occupation of Berlin and Germany were by no means free from tension. Nevertheless, in 1945 Berlin was still the hopeful symbol of prolonging into the postwar era the collaboration which had defeated the Axis.

1. Alois Riklin, Das Berlinproblem: Historisch-politisch and völkerrechtliche Darstellung des Viermächtestatus (Köln, 1964), p. 11. Riklin's work contains a comprehensive bibliography. Excellent studies include Kurt L. Shell, Bedrohung and Bewahrung in der BerlinKrise (Köln, 1965), and Jean Edward Smith, The Defense of Berlin (Baltimore, 1963), both focusing on the more recent aspects. Edgar McInnis, Richard Hiscocks, Robert Spencer, The Shaping of Postwar Germany (London, 1960), contains a brief account of "The Berlin Dilemma" by the present author. For an earlier article on Berlin in the Cold War see Philip Windsor, "Berlin," in Evan Luard, ed., The Cold War: A Re-appraisal (New York, 1964).

2. As Louis Halle has pointed out (The Cold War as History, New York, 1967, p. 162n), in his Fulton, Miss., speech Winston Churchill excluded the whole of East Germany from the Soviet empire when he referred to an iron curtain extending from "Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic."

3. Windsor, "Berlin," p. 121.

4. William M. Franklin, "Zonal Boundaries and Access to Berlin," World Politics, XVI (October, 1963), 26.

5. For a discussion of the view that in international law the right of occupation carries with it the right of access, see ibid., p. 24 and L. C. Green, "The Legal Status of Berlin," Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Internationaal Recht, X (1963), 117f.

II

In the two decades after 1945 the four-power experiment in international government was transformed into the hottest setting of the Cold War, as a series of Berlin crises brought the world the closest it has come to all-out nuclear war. [1] Many dates have been chosen to mark the beginning of the Cold War. [2] But the first great East-West showdown came not over Poland or Czechoslovakia but at Berlin in 1948, after the start of the Marshall Plan, the beginning of reconstruction in Western Germany, and the transformation of Eastern Europe into the Soviet image. At Berlin in 1948, moreover, Stalin provided the world with the type of crisis which was to become characteristic of the Cold War: "Semi-military pressure for limited ends, met by limited measures for self-defence aimed at nothing more than restoring the status quo."[3]

The crisis at Berlin in 1948 developed from the interaction of conflicting Russian and Western policies at Berlin and in the wider framework of the Cold War. Given its location, an island of freedom in the midst of an area over which Russia was attempting to maintain despotic control, Berlin might have been expected to develop as part of the Soviet zone. Instead, it emerged as an outpost of capitalist democracy in the centre of the developing Communist state. In this connection, two points may be made. First, the responsibility of providing food and fuel for their own sectors which the Russians from the start put upon the Western powers made access to Berlin as vital for the civilian as for the military population of the city. [4] And secondly, the results of the elections held in Berlin in October 1946-the only free Berlin-wide elections since the war—were critical in defining Soviet and Western attitudes not only in Berlin but in Germany as a whole. Instead of overwhelming victory, the Communists suffered overwhelming defeat. This checked Russian hopes of securing through elections a Communist Berlin as a springboard towards a Communist Germany. Thereafter to expect the Soviet Union to place any reliance on free elections was to expect it to admit defeat. [5] Stronger methods than an appeal to popular support would henceforth mark the U.S.S.R.'s German policy. In a broader sense, the Soviet Union could feel that its position in Germany as a whole was threatened by the Western moves towards economic recovery and political consolidation in their zones and in Western Europe as a whole. It was one of the ironies of the

developing East-West contest that every step in Soviet policy in the three years since the destruction of Hitler's Germany, however defensive in intention, had only confirmed the Western powers in the new policies which had followed the breakdown of four-power control over the key reparations issue. So it was to be with the Berlin blockade, which George Kennan has not unfairly described as "a defensive reaction" to the West's initial successes, " Moscow's last attempt to play, before it was too late, the various political cards it possessed," in an effort "to bring the three Western powers back to the negotiating table in order that Russia might continue to have a voice in all German affairs." [6]

Stalin's decision to test the West at Berlin confronted the Western powers with a challenge at their weakest point, politically and militarily, with their small garrisons surrounded by, and all but their air communications lying at the mercy of Soviet forces. Under these circumstances, as Louis Halle has observed, the temptation that the Russians were under to take advantage of the West's "extraordinary weakness" must have been "nearly irresistible." Given the local Communist military and political superiority it seemed as if they could not lose at Berlin and in their preparations for a fresh onslaught on the Western position in Germany. Perhaps all this explains why at Berlin, and only at Berlin, the Russians were so often ready to abandon their usual caution and to show themselves "desperate to the point of recklessness."[7]

In retrospect it seems clear that in 1948 Stalin aimed not at provoking a war but at achieving a significant political victory. George Kennan, who argued this point at the time against powerful opponents, had no doubt either as to the ruthlessness of Soviet tactics or their ultimate political aim — a fact which some reviewers have tended to overlook. The currency question — the formal pretext for the blockade — he writes, veiled a "squeeze play, designed to place the Western powers before an inescapable choice: either to abandon the German capital to Communist political control, thus clearly weakening the competitive political attraction of the new regime they were about to set up in Western Germany, or to abandon the London Program in favor of a new round of talks in the [Council of Foreign Ministers] and the limitation of further action on Germany to whatever could command Russian agreement."[8] There is ample evidence to suggest that the Western powers never seriously contemplated any such retreat from the steps to which they had felt compelled to resort following the breakdown of four-power control and the communization of the Soviet zone. Instead they determined to maintain the status quo at Berlin and to resist the Soviet encroachment which threatened it. In retrospect they appear to have overreacted and, for a time, to have seen in Soviet political pressure an aggressive military purpose which was not in fact there. General Clay's famous message of March 5, noting the "subtle change in [the] Soviet attitude," caused immense alarm in

Washington. Today it is easy enough to look back with greater knowledge and detachment and to see this war panic, as did Isaac Deutscher, as a fantastic misjudgement of the relative strengths of the opposing sides. [9] But even leaving aside the problem of assessing motives in the closed society beyond the Iron Curtain, it is wise to remember that the Berlin blockade followed an alarming series of Soviet moves. Moreover, one of the peculiarities of the Berlin situation was that Soviet action against West Berlin (which the Russians saw as defensive in character, that is, taken to remedy a local weakness and permit consolidation of the Soviet zone) could only be achieved at the expense of acknowledged Western rights and positions won by right of conquest, and was thus bound to be interpreted by the Western allies as aggression.

Although Stalin later insisted that expulsion of the Western powers was not among his objectives [10] (while at the same time, like Khrushchev a decade later, claiming that they had forfeited their right to be in Berlin), he confronted the Western powers with the uncomfortable choice between withdrawal or battling it out. “No one was sure,” Kennan recalls, “. . . how the Russian move could be countered or whether it could be successfully countered at all. The situation was dark, and full of danger.”[11] Although the logic of the military situation seemed to dictate withdrawal, a number of factors combined to lead to President Truman’s characteristically succinct “We’re going to stay. Period.” Memories of the consequences of Munich and the decisive role of a few strategically placed individuals like General Clay, whose undoubtedly exaggerated view that withdrawal from Berlin would lead to a crumbling away of the defences of Western Germany and Western Europe, played a part. Decisive, however, was the demonstration that the airlift could, against all predictions, sustain the Western position and Berlin’s 2.2 million people.

Twenty years later the airlift still appears as a “miracle”; [12] or at least as a remarkable triumph of determination, technical skill, and political courage. Its origins were less dramatic. Initiated in an effort to gain time for negotiations by supplementing the food and fuel stocks of the city, only very slowly was it understood that it could surmount the winter and be continued indefinitely. An earlier experiment had produced inconclusive results, and at the beginning of July the alternative of driving an armoured column along the Autobahn was considered. Although Clay believed this could be done without provoking Soviet military countermeasures, Washington decided against so hazardous an undertaking. [13] The Western response to the Soviet challenge was thus confined to the political realm, that is, to a firm assertion of Western rights (with some attempts at counterpressure), supplemented by brilliant technical improvization: an airlift whose dimensions neither Stalin nor the Americans had foreseen. To disrupt the airlift, which soon acquired

its own momentum, Stalin would have had to resort to shooting down planes in the air corridors, that is, to military measures paralleling those Washington had rejected. His nerves were not strong enough for that. The threat to introduce fighter escorts was sufficient to ensure the immunity of Western aircraft from serious Soviet interference, while it was one of the reassuring oddities of the crisis that the four-power Air Safety Centre in Berlin continued to function.

While the Western powers had made a number of fruitless attempts to end the blockade through negotiations, it was the first Soviet diplomatic initiative which led to the lifting of the blockade on May 12, 1949.[14] Stalin, it appears, was unwilling to negotiate until it became clear that he had failed to achieve his objectives both at Berlin and in Western Germany. As the months went by the Soviet Union had found itself increasingly in the embarrassing position of appearing, in the eyes of the world, to be trying to starve two million people into submission, while the airlift demonstrated Western determination, competence, and technical superiority, and the population of West Berlin (and of Western Germany) stood firm. Moreover, Russian pressure had only served to increase Western determination to resist and had made them less ready to sacrifice any part of their position through negotiations, especially when Stalin admitted the extent of the check to his earlier plans by lifting the blockade without waiting to see the outcome of the post-blockade talks. In the early days of the blockade Kennan and the State Department Policy Planning group had argued that the conflict could not be resolved in any satisfactory way at Berlin itself, but only by working out a broader German arrangement which would make Berlin secure by getting Russian agreement for the retirement of Soviet forces “from the entire area around Berlin” and the establishment of normal communications between Berlin and the West. But the airlift and the allied commitment to the London programme forced this scheme into the background. In the post-blockade talks, there was no disposition to turn back the clock. [15] Consequently, the blockade, instead of prizing the Western powers out of Berlin, had consolidated the Western plans for reconstruction in Western Germany. Moreover, as the endurance of the Berliners had caught the world’s imagination, it had helped to forge a new alliance between Germans and their former enemies, to turn foreign occupiers into protecting powers. The blockade, in short, made West Berlin part of the West; its defence would henceforth be as stubborn as the defence of the West itself.

The blockade had more far-reaching consequences. The impression of Russian ruthlessness and malevolence left by it seemed to confirm that a policy of strength was the one most likely to bring results in the Cold War. A feeling that in future contests it would be impossible to count on Stalin’s restraint helps explain why Kennan’s doctrine of containment was given a

military emphasis which he evidently had not intended. In the origins of the North Atlantic Treaty the Berlin blockade thus looms large as a causal factor. Together with the memory of what had occurred before 1939 through disunity and unpreparedness, it helped to force the "fundamental repudiation of isolationist traditions" which brought the three extra-continental powers to the defence of the continent. [16] Paradoxically, the threat to Berlin, where Moscow's local superiority had been neutralized and the status quo maintained thanks to the deterrent quality of the United States' nuclear weapons and long-range fire power, resulted in an increased emphasis on military strength in both East and West. [17]

1. Halle, Cold War as History, p. 162. To those who would protest not Berlin but Cuba, Halle (and many others) would argue that Khrushchev's 1962 adventure was ultimately directed at Berlin. See below, pp. 404 – 5.

2. On this, see Paul Seabury, The Rise and Decline of the Cold War (New York, 1967), pp. 1-10.

3. Wilfrid Knapp, "The Partition of Europe," in Luard, ed., The Cold War, pp. 56-7.

4. Lucius D. Clay, Decision in Germany (New York, 1950), pp. 27-9; Spencer "The Berlin Dilemma," pp. 108-10; Green, "The Legal Status of Berlin," p. 119.

5. Donald Watt, "Germany," in Luard, ed., The Cold War, pp. 99-100.

6. George F. Kennan, Memoirs, 1925-1950 (New York, 1967), pp. 401-2.

7. Halle, Cold War as History, pp. 162-3; Wilfrid Knapp, A History of War and Peace, 1939-1945 (London, 1967), p. 134.

8. Kennan, Memoirs, p. 420.

9. Isaac Deutscher, Ironies of History: Essays on Contemporary Communism (London, 1966), pp. 149.

10. Great Britain, Foreign Office, Germany: An Account of the Events Leading up to a Reference of the Berlin Question to the United Nations, Omd. 7534 (London, 1948), p. 22.

11. Kennan, Memoirs, p. 421.

12. So Geoffrey Hudson, The Hard and Bitter Peace: World Politics since

1945 (New York, 1967), p. 61.

13. Clay, Decision in Germany, p. 374; The Forrestal Diaries (New York, 1951), pp. 459-60; Robert Murphy, Diplomat among Warriors (New York, 1964), pp. 316-17; W. Phillips Davison, The Berlin Blockade: A Study in Cold War Politics (Princeton, 1958), p. 126.

14. Riklin, Das Berlinproblem, pp. 136-7.

15. Kennan, Memoirs, pp. 421-2, 443.

16. Hudson, Hard and Bitter Peace, pp. 62-3; Knapp, A History of War and Peace, p. 136.

17. Cf. Halle, Cold War as History, p. 166, and his “Lessons of the Nuclear Age,” Encounter, XXX (March, 1968), 20-2.

III

Between 1949 and the Khrushchev crisis of 1958 the status quo established in the post-blockade talks was maintained, and Berlin receded from the world's headlines. Although the sharpening division of Germany worked with particular hardship on Berlin, neither side wanted to risk the explosion which would have followed any major attempt to alter the status quo. East Berlin was progressively absorbed into the German Democratic Republic (D.D.R.), which had its capital and seat of government there, but the Soviet government was careful to preserve some vestige of the four-power control it loudly declared had become anachronistic. [1] Similarly, although West Berlin's economic and political ties with West Germany were progressively tightened, the Western powers remained unwilling to risk a further blockade by incorporating the Western parts of the city into the Federal Republic. Nor did West Berlin live up to its reputation in East German propaganda as a hotbed of fascist agitation and propaganda directed against the East German state. In June 1953, from their vantage point across the sector boundary, the Western powers watched, passively and powerlessly, the grim work of suppression of the East German rising by Soviet tanks. Although the Berlin question was kept alive in the fourpower talks in 1954, the Geneva summit the next year represented an armistice. Neither side could produce an alternative to the status quo which was acceptable to the other or which it was prepared to enforce as the risk of a fresh crisis. In his Reith lectures in 1957 George Kennan warned of the "extremely precarious and unsound arrangements which now govern the status of Berlin." [2] Kennan wrote on the eve of a period of prolonged crisis; yet at its end, five years later, the essentials of the Berlin situation remained.

Any explanation of why Khrushchev initiated the Berlin crisis in 1958 and sustained it over the next four years must necessarily be speculative. Checked in his attempt to divide nato by pressure on Turkey in 1957, defeated in an attempt to penetrate the Middle East, and confronted with a firm American response to the threat to Quemoy and Matsu in 1958, he appears to have moved to regain the initiative through a fresh attempt to compel the Western powers to abandon Berlin and recognize the D.D.R. His basic aim appears to have been to translate into political advantage the spectacular achievements of Soviet science and technology in orbiting the first space satellite and in

testing the first intercontinental ballistic missile. [3] Russia's apparent strategic lead over the United States thus suggested to him that he could both succeed at Berlin and break the Western alliance by confronting the West with a Russian diplomacy that could not appear as other than an irresistible force. In this he could count on the assistance of powerful and conspicuous minorities in the West who advocated surrender in response to Moscow's nuclear diplomacy. [4]

There were also powerful local factors to explain why Khrushchev's diplomacy for the next five years came to centre about Berlin. The situation at Berlin was more than an annoyance from the Soviet point of view. An open sore, which threatened Moscow's control over East Germany and thus over its whole satellite empire, the Russians (and the East Germans) had had to live with it for a decade and were understandably anxious to remove it by eliminating Western influence from West Berlin and making the truce lines into a permanent frontier. Khrushchev's method of achieving this aim was shrewdly chosen to place the Western allies in a position of maximum difficulty. His free city proposal, superficially an attractive way out of a seemingly insolvable impasse, was actually the culmination of "the ominous tendency," which George Kennan had noted a year earlier, of the Soviet government to remain aloof while allowing (or encouraging) the East German régime to make the Western position in the city an untenable one. If the Western powers accepted it, their token garrisons would be neutralized by the presence of Soviet forces in West Berlin and the city's freedom and independence threatened by the transference of control of the hitherto inviolable air communications to the D.D.R.; if they rejected it, Krushchev could easily transfer Soviet powers over the access routes to the D.D.R. which the Western powers would be compelled to recognize. Both Western policy towards Germany and the Western position in Berlin would thus be undermined without the need for any overt move against Berlin.

In the face of this shrewdly conceived challenge the Western position at Berlin was weak. Although new electricity generating station, new runways at Tempelhof and Tegel, larger and more efficient aircraft, and large stocks of food and fuel would obviate some of the inconveniences of a new blockade, new developments in electronics might threaten an airlift. Moreover, the garrisons in West Berlin were mere token forces, capable of dealing only with civil disorders or minor border incursions. The defence of Berlin rested on the United States' nuclear armament. President Eisenhower made this clear when he told a press conference on March 11, 1959, that the United States had no intention of fighting a ground war. The only kind of war the West could fight, he said, would be "a general nuclear war in which the cities on both sides of the Atlantic would be targets." [5]

The logic of the situation, even more than in 1948, called for a Western withdrawal. But again, however logical on military grounds, politically the abandonment of Berlin, "the principal symbol of Western determination not to give way before Moscow," was unthinkable. The local superiority of the U.S.S.R. and the determination of the West to resist the Soviet challenge meant a nuclear confrontation, more serious than in 1948 now that both sides possessed nuclear weapons. In 1958, as in 1948, Khrushchev presumably sought negotiation, not war, aiming to drive the Western powers to a fresh summit where there was practically nothing they could yield without endangering their own positions. He could threaten war; but as the Western garrisons in Berlin were on his side of the frontier he could represent this as a warning against the use of force by the West. [6] In the confrontation which followed his ultimatum in November 1958, each side advanced only far enough to see which would be the first to turn back from the brink. For Khrushchev, who had initiated the crisis in a mood of rash overconfidence, the awareness that if the Western powers were pushed too far the danger of nuclear war would be grave was a clear limitation on his freedom of action. Moreover, as the course of the crisis was to show, in a situation where one side threatened and the other stood firm and neither could risk a showdown, the defender of the status quo had the advantage. It was thus critical that in 1958 Russian policy was, for the first time, that of a revisionist power rather than a status quo power, and thus no longer based on a wish to prevent something happening but on the demand for a change in the status of Berlin. [7]

After having screwed international tension up to heights unequalled since the stormy days of the Korean War with his demand for a new status for Berlin which would involve virtual capitulation by the Western powers, Khrushchev was forced by Western firmness and unity to cast around for ways of de-escalating the confrontation and postponing his ultimatum. The crisis began to soften as the Western position hardened. Mikoyan's visit to the United States (which was welcomed by Dulles on the grounds that it might bring "a definite break in the Berlin situation") opened the way. While driving the Western powers along the road to the summit—the only alternative to nuclear disaster in which, as Gromyko put it, "the flames of war would inevitably reach the American continent"—Khrushchev was no less determined to make the relaxation of international tension conditional on obtaining what he wanted. In his new guise as a man of reasonableness it was easy for him to picture the West as refusing to negotiate and thus standing in the way of peaceful solutions. At the Geneva conference in the summer of 1959, which served as a cover for his retreat from his ultimatum, his new tactics succeeded to the extent of demonstrating Western willingness to make concessions in the interests of securing an interim solution which, if agreed to, would have made their position in 1961 untenable. And at Camp

David in September the intractable Berlin issue, in Louis Halle's words, got lost in "great and ennobling generalizations." [8]

By the close of 1959, although the momentum of the diplomatic offensive over Berlin which he had launched a year earlier had been lost, Khrushchev could afford to let the question lie dormant in the hope that the new high level meeting, to which he was guiding the Western powers, might bring about not only agreement over Berlin but progress in disarmament negotiations. At the same time he needed a success, for he was coming under increasing pressure from Ulbricht, who stood to gain from a solution along the lines Khrushchev had proposed and whose interests suffered as the prolongation of the crisis kept the refugee flow at a high level. On the other hand, a summit, if focused on Berlin, could bring little to the West, whose position at Berlin was so weak that nothing could be yielded if the minimum required to maintain the city's independence from Communist control was to be preserved. The tough statements emanating from Western capitals on the eve of the summit showed that the Western powers had not moved any distance towards accepting the Russian proposals.

If Krushchev's call for negotiations at the summit (which was so thoughtlessly echoed in the West as though the mere fact of negotiation was a panacea) was likely to lead to either deadlock or a decisive Western capitulation (perhaps not confined to Berlin), it may well have been the world's good fortune that in May 1960 all attention was focused on the U-2 incident and that Berlin was for the moment forgotten. Khrushchev's public flaying of President Eisenhower rescued the former from the agonizing dilemma of choosing between spectacular and risky action over Berlin and the humiliation of diplomatic defeat. [9] Within a few days the atmosphere cooled, and the Soviet leader gave assurances that until a new summit, expected in six or seven months, "the present situation in Berlin would be maintained." Yet the outlook remained profoundly depressing. On the Western side, the United States was paralysed by the presidential elections, and long-standing United States positions were being eroded (not least locally at Berlin). [10] On the other hand, Khrushchev had failed to prize the Western powers out of Berlin either by nuclear menaces or through exploiting the détente. Probably under severe Chinese pressure as a result of the refutation of his détente thesis, he was now so deeply committed to getting his way over Berlin somehow or other that his survival as ruler of Russia may well have depended on it. [11]

1. Shell, Bedrohung und Bewährung, pp. 5, 10; Green, "The Legal Status of Berlin," pp. 125-6.

2. George Kennan, Russia, the Atom, and the West (London, 1958), p. 41.

3. Marshall D. Shulman, “Recent Soviet Foreign Policy: Some Patterns in Retrospect,” Journal of International Affairs, XXII (1968), 27.

4. Halle, Cold War as History, p. 352.

5. Quoted in ibid., pp. 355-6.

6. Hudson, Hard and Bitter Peace, p. 221.

7. Halle, Cold War as History, p. 359; Coral Bell, Negotiation from Strength (London, 1962), p. 177. However, as President Kennedy became aware at Vienna in June 1961, East and West had different conceptions of the status quo which both claimed they wanted to preserve. For Kennedy it meant that social and political change must be effected without a shift in the East-West balance of power; for Khrushchev the status quo was a dynamic concept, involving the continuation of the revolution without Western interference. See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Boston, 1965), pp. 366-7.

8. Hudson, Hard and Bitter Peace, p. 222; Riklin, Das Berlinproblem, p. 195; Halle, Cold War as History, p. 367.

9. Hudson, Hard and Bitter Peace, p. 226.

10. Smith, Defense of Berlin, p. 228.

11. Hudson, Hard and Bitter Peace, p. 227; Halle, Cold War as History, p. 395; Shulman, “Recent Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 28.

IV

Having given up on President Eisenhower, Khrushchev evidently was prepared to try again with the new administration. Under the influence of the spirit of Camp David Eisenhower had referred to the Berlin situation as abnormal; but subsequently he had proved unexpectedly tough. That the Soviet leader placed his hopes in the new president was in some respects puzzling, for Kennedy had taken a tough line during the 1960 campaign. But at least he was inexperienced, less blatantly anti-communist, perhaps more likely to compromise and to be more responsive to the clamour of the idealistic intellectuals who tended to regard a firm stand at Berlin as a senseless demonstration of a criminal willingness to let the world be destroyed by nuclear war. [1]

Despite the signs of a growing community of interests between the two antagonists, the division of Europe, and with it the division of Berlin and of Germany, did not appear susceptible to any precisely conceived diplomatic solution. Both sides were firmly committed to previously staked out positions; both feared that retreat would spell disaster. Could the two antagonists continue to live with the status quo established after the blockade? For the Western powers it probably could be indefinitely prolonged: for their position in West Berlin enabled them to maintain a posture of concern for ultimate reunification and so to keep pressure from Bonn within tolerable limits. But the draining of essential elements of East Germany's population through the Berlin escape hatch may well have given Krushchev an almost desperate feeling that he had to stop the flight and stabilize the status quo. Although in musing over the question "Where did it all go wrong?" President Kennedy afterwards felt that some United States moves in the spring of 1961 may have been unnecessarily provocative, it seems clear that Khrushchev found adequate inspiration at Berlin and in his more general ambitions. If he could drive the Western powers out of Berlin he could also subject them to a humiliation which would decisively alter the balance of power in the U.S.S.R.'s favour. [2]

Having failed at Berlin in 1958, 1959, and 1960, Khrushchev in the spring of 1961 went over to the attack again. His congratulatory telegram to Kennedy on his election was the opening gun in the campaign to arrange a new

summit in which the Berlin question would be central. In his speech of January 6 he stated that it was necessary to continue "step by step, to bring the aggressive-minded imperialists to their senses," and warned that "if they balk, we shall take resolute measures." [3] Further Russian action such as the publication of a bluntly worded aide-mémoire to the government of the Federal Republic, renewing the demands for a peace treaty and for making West Berlin into a free city, forced the United States to demonstrate publicly its inflexibility on Berlin, and drove the Western powers into an unexpected unity on Berlin at the nato council in Oslo.

Despite Khrushchev's renewed trumpeting of his intentions over Berlin, the new president was anxious to find out for himself what the Soviet leader was like, and, as he said, "It is far better that we meet at the summit than at the brink." [4] Despite (or perhaps because of) increased Soviet pressure at Berlin Kennedy was anxious to impress on Khrushchev personally American determination to stand by the position there, to make clear that the Soviet leader "must not crowd him too much." "I wanted," he said later, "to present our views to him directly, precisely, realistically, and with an opportunity for clarification and discussion." For his part Krushchev delayed his acceptance of the President's invitation until after the Bay of Pigs disaster had somewhat tarnished the image of the new administration.

The publicity given to the firm views expressed in Paris (where en route to Vienna Kennedy was advised by de Gaulle to make it clear that the West could not "withdraw its troops or accept obstacles to access or permit a change in the status of West Berlin") failed to deter Moscow from its determination to press for an early solution to the Berlin problem on lines which, if Western statements meant anything, could only lead to a further serious East-West confrontation. At Vienna Berlin was a central topic, the subject on which Khrushchev displayed "his greatest animation and intensity." The Soviet leader arrived armed with an uncompromisingly worded aide-mémoire setting out Russian intentions, perhaps because his colleagues in Moscow had to be reassured that he would hew to the tough line. Krushchev bluntly made clear his determination to sign with East Berlin by the end of the year, with or without Western acquiescence, a peace treaty which would establish West Berlin as a free city, end all Western rights of occupation and access, and clear the road to an improvement of East-West relations. His performance, Arthur Schlesinger records, was "not quite a tirade: it was too controlled and hard and therefore the more menacing." In reply Kennedy made clear that Berlin was of "vital and primary concern" to the United States and begged the Soviet leader not to present him with a crisis "so deeply involving the American national interest." No ground was given on either side. To Khrushchev's final warning that he would sign the peace treaty in December, Kennedy replied: "It will be a cold winter." [5]

Khrushchev's encounter with the young president ought to have shown him (but clearly did not) that he could hardly expect Berlin to be handed to him on a platter, either through a fit of absence of mind or in response to some craving for appeasement. His report to the Russian people on June 15 restated the views advanced at Vienna and screwed the tension a little higher. He insisted that West Berlin was situated on the territory of the German Democratic Republic, and that after the signing of the peace treaty "any countries wishing to maintain ties with West Berlin will have to reach agreement with the German Democratic Republic," and of course recognize it. The time bomb had been set ticking again. [6]

President Kennedy came away from Vienna deeply disturbed at his apparent failure to persuade the Soviet leader that the West would fight for Berlin. He had, he told the American people on June 6, made it clear to Khrushchev that "the security of Western Europe and therefore our security are [sic] deeply involved in our presence and our access rights to West Berlin, . . . and that we are determined to maintain those rights at any risk, and thus meet our obligation to the people of West Berlin." His feeling that Khrushchev still underestimated American determination was underlined by Khrushchev's reiteration in his account of the meeting, that "a peace treaty cannot be postponed any longer," and he feared that because of Soviet miscalculation of American determination war might come from the showdown which Walter Lippmann, after his conversation with the Soviet leader in April, had felt was unavoidable. In that summer of 1961 East and West approached the brink of holocaust. Many politicians, including Prime Minister Diefenbaker of Canada, found the rising tension "reminiscent of 1914 and 1939." As James Reston wrote a little later in the New York Times, "If Khrushchev and his wholly owned subsidiary in East Germany try to block the West's access to Berlin then the risk of war will be taken . . . . Nuclear war in such circumstances is not 'unthinkable.' It is, in cold fact, being thought about and planned."[7]

In the weeks after Vienna American policy evolved on two lines: a firm withstanding of Soviet pressure coupled with an ostentatious build-up of American and nato strength; and the examination of all kinds of proposals for accommodation with the Soviet Union. The prospects for negotiations were hardly encouraged by a further speech by Khrushchev, delivered in the full uniform of a lieutenant-general on the anniversary of the German invasion in 1941, in which he said that if the West wanted a trial of strength it could have one; nor by his subsequent suspension of the previously announced reduction in Soviet forces and an increase in the military budget. The Western notes in reply to the Vienna memorandum displayed an impressive unity in emphasizing their determination to stay in Berlin, although their alliance with the Bonn government and their commitment to German reunification required them to reject any attempt to formalize the status quo

by treaty. Once again, by his threat to Berlin Khrushchev had driven the West together and had worked what a writer in Le Monde described as a “magical effect” on American morale. [8] This was shown in Kennedy’s speech of July 25. Mixing firmness with a willingness to negotiate to “remove any actual irritants,” he warned that Berlin was “the great testing place of Western courage,” and that the United States would defend its rights “at all costs.” To emphasize that the United States would go to war rather than permit “the Communists to drive us out of Berlin either gradually or by force,” and to meet any possibility that the Russians might simply ignore the nuclear threat he ordered a strengthening of American conventional forces. [9]

How the confrontation might have developed had the issue of a peace treaty and Western rights in and access to West Berlin not been obscured by the developing crisis in the D.D.R. it is impossible to say. For while the West was demonstrating its determination and Khrushchev was attempting to divide it, the life blood of the D.D.R. was ebbing away. The local crisis developed a self-generating character. Of all the participants in it the citizens of the D.D.R. had the least confidence in the free city proposal which, against all the probabilities, Khrushchev insisted would not change the status of West Berlin. As the crisis intensified the flow of refugees became a flood, as east of the Elbe there developed a Torschlusspanik, a panicky belief that the escape hatch might soon be closed. East German measures against the flow of refugees only intensified it, until from August 13 “reliable guards and effective controls” were established along the sector boundary to shut off East Berlin and East Germany, as Walter Ulbricht explained, from the “extremely dangerous hotbed of war” in West Berlin. Whether the initiative came from the D.D.R. or from Russia, the closing of the frontier was forced on Khrushchev by the interests of the D.D.R. [10]

Both the nature and the timing of the East German action took the West completely by surprise. The test-of-will thesis had diverted attention from the problems of East Germany; and the crisis had not been expected before the 22nd party congress in October. The Western powers were not driven from the city; the security of West Berlin was not threatened; instead of threats to the access routes came assurances against interference with them. If the D.D.R. was to remain a viable state, closing its Berlin frontier was (at least in retrospect) an obvious preliminary to Khrushchev’s peace treaty. Tactically it also offered endless opportunities to test Western determination, while providing the occasion for driving wedges between Germany and her allies and between West Berlin and both. Yet although some prominent figures in the United States had made damaging statements concerning the need for and justice of any attempts to seal off the frontiers, the West’s contingency planning does not seem to have reckoned with it but rather to have been based on the prospect of a new blockade. [11] The barriers, moreover, were

built on East Berlin territory by the acknowledged civil power in East Berlin; and as President Kennedy was reported to have said early in August, “I can get the alliance to move if he tries to do anything about West Berlin but not if he just does something about East Berlin.” [12] The West thus took only paper or morale-building counteraction. No one was prepared to remove the barriers by force; only to protect the independence of West Berlin and the inviolability of the access routes. Whether the barriers could have been removed without provoking a serious conflict remains a debatable (and debated) question. [13] On August 13 East German police were not issued with live ammunition, only the officers. The hesitant and progressive nature of subsequent East German measures suggests that (one thinks of the Rhineland in 1936) firm opposition could have led to a retreat. On the other hand, as staunching the refugee flow was presumably a vital Russian interest, and as any move against the barriers would have involved an attack across a tacitly accepted political division, Moscow’s reaction might have been drastic. What does appear certain, however, is that the West’s inaction emboldened the East Germans to further moves: on August 18 the construction of the Wall began.

The immediate effect of the sealing off of the sector boundary was not to lessen but to heighten the crisis, as the prestige of both sides suffered a blow: for the Communists it involved a damaging admission of the unpopularity of their system; for the West a severe blow to the remaining elements of four-power status. The sharpened division of the city, if anything, strengthened Western determination by limiting Western commitments and simplifying the issues. This was reflected in the sharp reaction to the Soviet threat of interference with allied air traffic in the corridors. Here the Russians were trespassing into an area where force would be necessary to establish claims for which they could produce no convincing legal basis and Washington went so far as to warn that any interference with civilian air traffic would be regarded as a casus belli. But war was not on the Soviet agenda, and the air corridors remained unchallenged. Khrushchev appeared, it was afterwards plausibly asserted, “to be operating on the assumption that there was a kind of grey zone between the point where western leaders realized they had to negotiate and the point at which they had to fight. His aim was to force the western leadership into and along this grey zone without ever driving them to the point where they had to fight, forcing continued concessions of ground from them without ever being forced to concede something in return.”[14]

The sealing off of the sector boundary—which was widely viewed in the West as only the first stage of Moscow’s plan—took some of the sting out of the crisis. With the solution of his immediate problem, that of ending the population drain which threatened the stability and viability of the Ulbricht régime, Khrushchev could now live with the situation in West Berlin and was

accordingly relieved of the necessity of forcing the issue to a showdown. Whether one sees the Soviet resumption of nuclear testing as a form of nuclear blackmail in the interests of extracting further concessions at Berlin or elsewhere, or as a smokescreen to distract attention from the Soviet abandonment of its peace treaty plan, the crisis continued at a fever pitch until the end of October. [15] When Khrushchev told the 22nd party congress that the Western powers were showing "some understanding of the situation," he was demonstrating that Western willingness to negotiate was more important to Russia than the substantive issues at stake. Soviet tanks trundled away, leaving the Wall as a brutal reminder of the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe as on East Berlin. Khrushchev lifted his deadline. The crisis came to an end, as it had begun, on Russian initiative, and Khrushchev had the power and political courage to force retreat on his own people. [16]

1. Smith, Defense of Berlin, pp. 228-9; Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, pp. 346-7; Halle, Cold War as History, p. 395.

2. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, pp. 347-8.

3. D. C. Watt, ed., Documents on International Affairs, 1961 (London, 1965), contains this and many other relevent documents.

4. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 305.

5. Ibid., pp. 370-4; Halle, Cold War as History, p. 396.

6. Hudson, Hard and Bitter Peace, p. 227; Halle, Cold War as History, p. 396.

7. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, pp. 374-5; Shell, Bedrohung und Bewährung, pp. 16, 26-7.

8. Cited in D. C. Watt, Survey of International Affairs, 1961 (London, 1965), p. 229.

9. William W. Kaufmann, The McNamara Strategy (New York, 1964), p. 257.

10. Shell, Bedrohung und Bewährung, p. 27; Knapp, A History of War and Peace, p. 487.

11. Shell (Bedrohung und Bewährung, p. 30) notes that not a single West Berlin paper seriously discussed the possibility of a closing of the frontier or possible countermeasures.

12. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 394.

13. See, for example, the conflicting views of Halle (Cold War as History, p. 397), Hudson (Hard and Bitter Peace, p. 229), and Eleanor Lansing Dulles (Berlin: The Wall is not Forever (Chapel Hill, 1967), pp. 62-3). Willy Brandt later told Arthur Schlesinger that "On August 13 no one proposed that we stop the Wall. We all supposed that such action would run the risk of war." A Thousand Days, p. 402.

14. Watt, Survey of International Affairs, 1961, pp. 247-8.

15. See ibid., p. 255, and Hans Speier, Divided Berlin: The Anatomy of Soviet Political Blackmail (New York, 1961).

16. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, pp. 400, 404; Knapp, A History of War and Peace, p. 488; David Rees, The Age of Containment (London, 1967, pp. 90-1.

V

The construction of the Wall was only a stopgap, a temporary measure of relief, averting the worst consequences to the Communists of West Berlin's independent existence, until such time as Khrushchev could achieve the victory at Berlin to which he had committed himself almost beyond recall. How this was to be achieved must have been a question agitating the Soviet leadership at the 22nd party congress in the autumn of 1961, as it became clear that Soviet local superiority at Berlin had been neutralized by the fear of escalation to a level where the United States had the advantage. Resort to an ultimatum had been discredited. Cuba, however, offered an opportunity to surprise the West by overcoming American military superiority and so to bring stronger pressure on Berlin than had yet been used. If he could install missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev could turn the flank in Berlin, and with this "trump card" (McNamara's phrase) in his hand, he could renew the campaign against Berlin under a more favourable balance of power. The gains of so reckless a venture were thus tempting. Soviet missiles in Cuba, Kennedy told Schlesinger, would "radically redefine the setting in which the Berlin problem could be reopened."[1]

Khrushchev's failure in the Caribbean carried with it failure at Berlin. The obvious retort to the United States' naval quarantine was a Soviet blockade at Berlin. But in his speech announcing American measures, President Kennedy warned that the United States would not shrink from the risk of nuclear war and added that "any hostile move anywhere in the world against the safety and freedom of peoples to whom we are committed—including in particular the brave people of West Berlin— will be met by whatever action is needed." Kennedy's firm words may well have deterred any Soviet move at Berlin; the Russians, in fact, made studious efforts to dissociate the two crisis areas. [2] The Cuban crisis subsided as suddenly as it had blown up, and Khrushchev was back where he had been four years earlier. In their visits to the opposite sides of the now more tightly divided city the next year Khrushchev said of the Wall "I like it very much," while Kennedy, overcome by its stark horror, as so many others have been on seeing it for the first time, roused a seething crowd before the Schöneberger Rathaus to near hysteria with the cry that "as a free man, I take pride in the words, 'Ich bin ein Berliner.'" The crisis, clearly, was over. It was buried in 1964 in the Treaty of Friendship, Mutual

Assistance and Cooperation concluded between the Soviet Union and the D.D.R. Conspicuously not the separate peace treaty promised six years earlier, and giving Ulbricht little that he did not already possess, the treaty's references to the continued validity of the Potsdam agreement suggested that Khrushchev was not prepared to grant to his "prize pupil" control over matters such as Western rights in and access to West Berlin, or to risk again the loss of freedom of manoeuvre which he had sustained vis-à-vis the D.D.R. in the summer of 1961.

1. On the relation of the Cuban venture to the Berlin problem, see, for example, Halle, Cold War as History, p. 400; Hudson, Hard and Bitter Peace, pp. 227-8; Kaufmann, The McNamara Strategy, p. 271; Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 811; Richard P. Stebbins, The United States in World Affairs, 1962 (New York, 1963), p. 96.

2. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 823.

VI

Looking back nearly a quarter of a century after the end of World War II it is not difficult to see how and even why Berlin came to be the principal centre of tension in the Cold War. That the wartime allies should fall out on the morrow of victory was hardly unexpected. That Berlin should feature prominently in the East-West struggle for control of the defeated Reich was also probably inevitable, in view of the city's importance, symbolic and real, for Germany and for Europe. But the place of Berlin in the Cold War was also a result of the pattern of conquest in 1945 and of the unprecedented occupation arrangements. As occupation lines hardened into zonal and then state frontiers, and the Western powers found themselves confronting their erstwhile allies in the heart of a divided Europe, at Berlin they were actually on the other side of the frontier. It was this feature which allowed Berlin to develop into a tempting pressure point, where the Soviet Union could try, by all means short of war, and at little cost, either to secure political control of the whole of Berlin and so tighten control over Eastern Germany and Eastern Europe, or to achieve the larger purposes of a communized Germany and the consequent disruption of the Western alliance. In the first major crisis of 1948-49 Russian policy was still focused on Germany as a whole; in the second of 1958-62 it was directed towards tidying up the anomalous situation which had become a serious embarrassment to its political ambitions, with a total lack of concern for the fate or the wishes of the population of West Berlin, or indeed of that of Western and Eastern Germany.

Apart from the occasional provocative cries and gestures which emanated from Western Germany, Western policy at Berlin throughout the two decades since the end of the war was largely passive and, as Communist pressure increasingly confined the Western allies to West Berlin, amounted to little more than a stubborn defence of the minimum required to retain the position there won in 1945. As Soviet policy gradually reduced Western rights, by the mid-'fifties there was practically nothing which the Western allies could concede in the negotiations towards which the U.S.S.R. pressed them during the crisis of 1958-62. One of the main legacies of the blockade of 1948-49 was the fact that Western prestige became involved at Berlin in a way no one had quite foreseen three years earlier. It was this, together with the growing conviction that Western interests in Germany, Europe, and even beyond the

confines of the continent would be adversely affected by a Soviet victory at Berlin and the sense of commitment to the population of West Berlin which accounted for the stubborn Western resistance to Soviet pressure. Despite the doubts frequently expressed through the Cold War decades, and against all logic, the West's defensive policies were successful. When the crisis eased off in the 'sixties, the Western minimum position in West Berlin, despite its anomalous status, was still intact. This defensive victory was not without its cost. By adopting a policy which basically amounted to no more than the lowest common denominator of the defence of West Berlin and its access routes, the Western powers demonstrated that they were prepared to pay for the freedom of the West Berliners with the "unfreedom" of the East Germans. 1

Since October 1962—the date generally favoured as marking the end of the acute phase of the Cold War—Soviet policy has pressed for neither competitive gains nor major settlements. After the treaty of June 1964 it appeared unlikely that the threatening attitudes of 1948-49 or 1958-62 would be renewed in the near future. Yet Berlin's geopolitical situation remains un- changed; the thaw in relations between Western and Eastern Europe has by no means touched the relationship between Western and Eastern Germany. Given the unresolved problem of Germany as a whole, there will undoubtedly continue to be recurrent crises at Berlin or along the access routes, alarming if perhaps more local in character, as during the winter of 1967-68, when Moscow pressed Bonn to weaken its ties with West Berlin, and East Berlin renewed its threats to the other half of the city, or in June 1968, when the D.D.R. initiated new restrictions and fees on the access routes. These periodic crises serve as a reminder that West Berlin's position remains precarious. At the same time a new threat to this relic of the Cold War, and one that is more difficult to meet, comes from within. Having survived in remarkable fashion twenty years of the East-West power struggle, West Berlin faces the more subtle challenge of finding a role or mission which will enable it to overcome the hazards of its political and geographical situation, and to survive and prosper until the distant day when German reunification either comes or becomes irrelevant.

1. John Mander, Berlin: Hostage for the West (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 120
.